



University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

RESEARCH AS *MISSION CREEP*? RECONSIDERING SCHOLARSHIP IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

BY STEVEN E. GUMP

Introduction

The fairly uncontested “main purpose” of community colleges, according to Palmer (2002, p. 9), “is to help students learn academic disciplines and career skills.” To achieve such goals, faculty members at community colleges have emphasized teaching to such an extent that “excellence in teaching is the hallmark of the community college” (Padovan & Whittington, 1998, p. 213). But community college faculty clearly do more than teach. When the potential scholarly activities of full-time community college faculty are narrowly defined as research, however, mission creep is insinuated, and community colleges are accused of attempting to encroach upon the purview of four-year research institutions in an expression of “goal displacement” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 29). One way to invalidate the criticisms of mission creep is to apply a broader definition of scholarship, as suggested by Boyer (1990), Palmer (1991), Parilla (1987), and Vaughan (1991), to the activities of community college faculty. Doing so enables faculty professionalization as well as connectedness to the discipline of instruction, a discipline to which all community college faculty members belong.

This brief suggests a perspective from which to view possible scholarly roles, responsibilities, and contributions of community college faculty. Specific questions include the following:

- How connected are community college faculty to their respective disciplines? What are the relationships between research or scholarship and disciplinary connectedness?
- What is meant by research? Is it different from scholarship? If so, is the difference important?
- How is professionalization implicated in the research-scholarship-disciplinary connectedness equation?
- What happens to teaching when community college faculty engage in research or scholarship?
- What does engaging in research mean personally for community college faculty?

Missions and Mission Creep in American Higher Education

Notable higher education leader Clark Kerr (2001) defined and cautioned against mission creep by describing it as

a well-known phenomenon in American higher education in which one segment of higher education redefines its mission to include responsibilities already being performed by another. Once set in motion, mission creep is nearly impossible to reverse. It has cost taxpayers in most states millions of dollars because it has generated unproductive competition, overbuilding, and duplication of effort in public higher education systems around the country. (p. 3)

One common form of mission creep in today’s institutions of higher education involves the expectation of faculty members who seek promotion or tenure to publish. To Kennedy (1997, p. 186), “publication is the fundamental currency” in the “world of scholarship”; Olson (1997, pp. 19–20) described published works, also in economic terms, as the “currency” with which faculty members “purchase tenure, promotion, salary increases, and the respect of colleagues.” The drive to publish is entangled with the assumption that publishing is predicated on research, which Clark (1987) described as “always a powerful coin in the academic realm” (p. 59) and “the primary basis for prestige in the many disciplines” (p. 70). For Cohen and Brawer (2003, p. 171), “a university’s prestige often rests on its faculty’s scholarship and research discoveries.” Thus, increasing research productivity through the proxy of faculty publications is believed to be a way of increasing the ethereal yet highly desirable commodity of institutional prestige (Gump, 2006; Newman, Courtier, & Scurry, 2004; Tierney, 1999). Mission creep enables the power of scholarship and research to be appropriated by institutions that are not (or *not yet*) categorized or conceptualized as universities.

Research is accepted as and understood to be one of the three (or four) missions of, appropriately, public research universities in the United States. (The other missions are teaching, service,

and economic development, with the latter, a relative newcomer, often included under the umbrella of service [Gumpert, 2001].) For example, the current mission statement of the University of Illinois begins as follows: “The University of Illinois is among the preeminent public universities of the nation and strives constantly to sustain and enhance its quality in *teaching, research and public service*” (*About the University: Mission*, n.d.; emphases mine). Although single examples cannot be expected to be representative of all institutions of even a similar size and scope, the single-sentence mission statement of Parkland College in Champaign, Illinois, provides a fitting example of a community college mission, especially in the manner in which it emphasizes the comprehensive nature of its offerings:

Parkland College is a comprehensive community college in Illinois dedicated to *providing programs and services of high quality to its students* and committed to continuous improvement, to academic achievement and its documentation, and to the concept of shared governance. (*Parkland College: Mission and purposes*, 2005; emphasis mine)

The fundamental community college mission of “serv[ing] the people” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 29) is explicitly mentioned in Parkland College’s mission, but research on the part of the faculty is not intimated. If the suggestion that community college faculty “should be encouraged to contribute to the literature of its respective disciplines and that of the general community college” (Hardin, 1975, p. 310) were embraced by all stakeholders at Parkland College, how different would the revised mission statement look from the mission of the University of Illinois, the higher education institution located across town?

Of course, describing research by community college faculty as a form of mission creep connotes that carrying out and publishing the results of research is, or should be, beyond the purview of community college faculty, who should focus on teaching. Such a claim is not substantiated in this brief, which instead problematizes the vocabulary used to describe the non-teaching, intellectual activities of community college faculty. These activities are commonly described as research and scholarship, with research typically invoking the four-year university paradigm that includes not only basic, pure, fundamental, and academic research but also applied research. Scholarship and scholarly activity are concepts that should be taken more broadly (Boyer, 1990). And although nearly two-thirds of community college faculty are employed part-time (Brint, 2003), the experiences and activities of full-time community college faculty are the focus of this brief.

Community College Faculty, Professionalization, and Research in the Academy

Emphasis on Teaching in Community Colleges

In his classic 1931 work, *The Junior College*, Eells described junior colleges (today more frequently referred to as community colleges) as “teaching institution[s] *par excellence*” (p. 389). Cohen and Brawer (2003, p. 165) noted that community colleges “have emphasized the importance of good teaching since

their earliest days, and their observers”—such as Eells—“have reported unanimously that teaching was their *raison d'être*.” This focus on teaching, of course, comes at the expense of other activities. Garrison (1967) found that the emphasis community college faculty place on the needs of their students detracts from the attention they can place on their academic disciplines. Likewise, Cohen and Brawer explained that community college faculty “have been free to address nearly their full attention to instructional processes” because they “have never devoted much time to research or academic discipline-based scholarship” (p. 165).

The assumption, therefore, continues to be that community college faculty emphasize teaching more than university faculty; or, at least, community college faculty spend more time on teaching and teaching-related tasks than do university faculty. According to Huber (1998, p. 12), “community college faculty stand out from many of their professional colleagues . . . because teaching—far more than research or service—is the heart of their profession.” Twombly (2004) tested this presumption, which Outcalt (2002, p. 9) referred to as “the (assumed) predominance of teaching,” in a recent study wherein she considered the issues of research, scholarship, and publication by community college faculty through the theoretical lens of professionalization. Supporters believe that community college faculty have (or can have) a distinct professional identity; critics believe they cannot.

The Meaning of Professionalization of Community College Faculty

For community college faculty, professionalization broadly relates to such issues as responsibilities, public perceptions, codes of ethics, training, licensure, and degrees of organization (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Outcalt (2002, p. 154) described the concept of professionalization as “nebulous,” clarifying that the term should not be viewed as a proxy for the quality of faculty members’ fulfillment of their responsibilities. At the time of earlier studies carried out by Cohen and Brawer (1972, 1977, 1984), community college faculty were not yet perceived as having acquired the following characteristics of professionalism: self-management, independence, effective self-evaluation, and “the provision of discrete services to a distinct clientele” (Outcalt, p. 154). Of course, community college students do form a distinct clientele by name and, by extension, identity; but the diversity of community college students—their backgrounds, needs, desires, abilities, and expectations—makes them “the most diverse [population] in higher education” (Outcalt, p. 157), nearly impossible to stereotype, pigeonhole, or neatly and briefly summarize and describe. And although the literature also frequently attempts to homogenize the community college faculty, treating it (in the singular) sweepingly and monolithically, being mindful of faculty diversity is especially important at the community college level, because, for example, more women and minorities hold full-time positions at public two-year colleges than at four-year colleges and universities (Perna, 2003). Lee (2002, p. 21) described community college faculty as comprising “a heterogeneous mix” of postsecondary instructors.

This diverse, heterogeneous faculty manifests its professionalism in many ways, one of which is through publication in disciplinary journals. According to the results of a survey of community college faculty conducted by the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement in 1997, for example, some 38% of 5,151 faculty respondents from schools across the United States reported they are “currently engaged in scholarly work that they expect to lead to a publication, exhibit or performance”; and 20% said they “have received a grant or special funding support for research in the last three years” (Huber, 1998, pp. 25, 82). The rather ambiguous notion of scholarly work, especially with relation to the potentially confusing concept of research, complicates measurements such as those reported by Huber.

Research as a Mode of Professionalization

Twombly (2004) built a study of community college faculty professionalization around a conceptual framework from Clark’s *The Academic Life* (1987). She commendably summarized Clark’s argument about research in the academy, referring primarily to four-year institutions as follows: “Research is the defining component of the academic profession because conducting research gives professors power to determine important parameters of their work environment, such as what subjects are taught, whom they teach, and what they research” (Twombly, p. 22). Twombly’s case study of three community colleges of varying sizes in different locations (rural area, medium-sized town, and large suburban locale) yielded findings that were remarkably in line with those reported by Garrison (1967), who concluded, among other considerations hampering the creation of a profession of community college faculty, that community college faculty could not control the identity or number of students they taught, were pressed for time to fulfill their duties, and lacked access to adequate professional development. Twombly found that faculty members do not have much influence over their work environments; neither do they have much say in what or whom they teach. And, as for research, the faculty “are not expected to do research and get no released time for this purpose” (p. 32). The latter was a function of the culture of the institutions: “The community colleges in this study do not emphasize research and do not seek faculty who are researchers” (p. 28). A dean at one of the community colleges in the study admitted to telling candidates for faculty positions the following: “We are not a research institution. Our primary purpose here is to teach. To teach, that’s our objective, that’s our major goal” (p. 32).

Vaughan criticized the “rejection of research as a professional activity” (1991, p. 4) for community college faculty. He echoed the dean’s admonition in Twombly (2004) by stating that “most community college faculty members are told upon accepting their positions that the community college is a teaching institution, which suggests in no uncertain terms that faculty need not do research” (Vaughan, p. 4). Such a situation is in line with van der Vorm (2001), who argued that successful faculty searches are led by search committees whose members clearly define their institutions’ missions. How, then, do community college faculty professionally and intellectually position themselves

within their disciplines, if research and, by association, subsequent publication or presentation are not promoted?

Disciplinary (Dis)connectedness

Clark (1987, p. 226) succinctly addressed the question of disciplinary connectedness by stating that community college faculty are “pushed toward a marginality that virtually cuts them out of the academic profession.” Cohen and Brawer described community college faculty as “a group that has severed connection with its disciplinary roots” (2003, p. 340). Twombly (2004), too, found that community college faculty members are not particularly connected to their disciplines, in part because their master’s or doctoral degrees may be in fields (such as education) different from that within which they are teaching—as well as because of their high teaching loads. Garrison (1967), Seidman (1985), Grubb (1999), and others have described the severe shortages of time felt by many community college faculty. Faculty at smaller (often rural) community colleges, furthermore, “are called upon to do many more things . . . things of such a diverse nature that it ends up taking a whole lot more time” (Wolfe & Strange, 2003, p. 350). And according to Cohen and Brawer, “research and scholarship on disciplinary concerns” will not become the purview of community college faculty for the following reasons: “The disciplinary affiliation among community college faculty is too weak, the institutions’ demands for scholarship are practically nonexistent, and the teaching loads are too heavy for that form of professionalism to occur” (2003, p. 97).

Block (1991, p. 20) referred to the “isolation from the discipline” often felt by community college faculty. He cited Pederson’s (1989) statement of the problem:

The failure of most community colleges to embrace an institutional value system which supports discipline-based research has cut the institution off from the dynamic quality of the disciplines and the larger intellectual culture. The effect of this isolation on community college faculty has been profound. (Pederson, p. 5)

But some literature expresses a different view. Palmer (2002), for example, looked at full-time community college faculty respondents to the U.S. Department of Education’s 1999 National Survey of Post-secondary Faculty (NSOPF-99) by eleven disciplinary groups and concluded that disciplinary affiliations matter to faculty within certain disciplines, including within the community college (p. 9). Aggregate findings (such as those from Huber, 1998) indeed mask interdisciplinary variations. Palmer’s survey of the NSOPF-99 data indicated that faculty in different disciplines engaged in research and writing at different rates—a valuable fact, if faculty publications can be read as indicators of faculty connectedness to their academic disciplines. Palmer found that faculty members in the fine arts and the humanities (51%) were more likely to engage in “professional research, proposal writing, creative writing, or creative works” than were faculty in business, engineering and computer sciences, health sciences, and vocational programs (20–25%). Similarly, the proportion of faculty who published at least one

article in the two years prior to the survey was higher in the humanities (45%) than in the other set of disciplines (22–26%).

In Palmer's words, "appreciating disciplinary differences counters the tendency to discuss the community college enterprise as a homogeneous culture" (2002, p. 18). Wolfe and Strange (2003) are another exception, noting the "distinctive hierarchy of disciplines" (p. 355) at the community college. A difficulty with using the findings of the NOSPF-99 survey or the data presented by Huber (1998) regarding faculty publications, however, especially in attempts to relate publications to disciplinary connectedness, is that the surveys do not discriminate between publications or "creative works" that are in a faculty member's disciplinary field and those that are not. To administrators who quantify faculty publications without concern for the nature of the venues, all publications may be equally worthwhile; to members of the discipline, clear hierarchies among journals (Olson, 1997) and presses (Day, 2001) exist.

Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activities at the Community College

Research: The Four-Year Institutional Paradigm

Research, scholarship, and creative activities comprise a triad of activities that frequently serves as a header on professors' vitae. As mentioned earlier, research, in terms of the dichotomy of basic versus applied, is the activity usually associated with faculty at research institutions. Much of the literature on community college faculty, on the other hand, seems either to use the three terms interchangeably or to favor the term *research*, creating confusion.

An analysis of the 2000 Community College Faculty Survey by Lee (2002) demonstrated that the university "remains an influential reference group for today's community college faculty" (p. 27). Fittingly, then, literature that refers to research by community college faculty seems to invite comparison with the four-year university model and mission. For example, Wolfe and Strange (2003), in their qualitative investigation involving interviews of seven community college faculty members at rural "Park Campus," reported that "Park faculty were cognizant of the traditional missions of faculty life (i.e., teaching, research, and service) and understood that Park emphasized teaching first" (p. 353). The faculty members seemed to conceptualize their potential responsibilities no differently than faculty members at four-year institutions, but they did realize that most of their time would be (and was) spent on teaching and on service to the community, with "research play[ing] a more subsidiary role for most" (p. 355). Wolfe and Strange continue: "In fact, one faculty member claimed, most individuals at this campus really do not conduct research" (p. 355). Another faculty member admitted "feel[ing] like a fraud," considering him- or herself as a teacher but not a scholar (p. 355).

Disciplinary Differences in Research at Community Colleges

Wolfe and Strange (2003) considered disciplinary differences when they commented that faculty in certain fields at Park Campus have easier opportunities to conduct research. Faculty in the humanities, because of the availability of library resources and interlibrary loans, have access to necessary tools for research. Faculty outside the humanities, however, face much more limited opportunities to conduct research. According to one faculty member at Park Campus, "especially for the sciences there's simply no place to do research here," due in part to the "equipment-intensive nature" of the work (p. 356). Such a sciences-versus-humanities dichotomy (à la Snow, 1959), with faculty in the humanities at small community colleges having easier access to materials for conducting research than faculty in the sciences, supports Palmer's (2002) NSOPF-99 findings, where faculty in the arts and humanities were more likely than faculty in other areas (especially the sciences) to have engaged in research or other creative work. But can this idea of professional research be expanded so it becomes accessible even to community college faculty members who are not in the arts or humanities?

Future Directions for Community College Faculty: Reconsidering Scholarship

Vaughan (1988) argued that community college faculty and administrators have clung "to the false belief that scholarship is tied solely to original research" (Vaughan & Palmer, 1991, p. 1). This belief seems rooted in the four-year university paradigm and thus corroborates Lee's (2002) assessment that university faculty remain an influential reference group for community college faculty today. As a result, according to Vaughan, community college educators have not used their broader professional roles as a means for defining and conceptualizing the work they do as scholarship.

Concurring with Boyer (1990), who made the same claim primarily for faculty at four-year colleges and universities, Palmer (1991, p. 69) stated that faculty and administrators at community colleges need to find and follow a "broad[er] definition of scholarship that goes beyond original research without diminishing the rigor of the work involved or relieving the scholar of his or her responsibility to remain accountable for the results." Likewise, Vaughan (1991) argued that

community college faculty members and administrators need to change their existing attitudes toward scholarship and to view it from the perspective of the community college mission, a perspective that means rejecting many of the old notions of what constitutes scholarship and adopting new ones. (p. 3)

These old notions of scholarship are those that limit the definition to academic or applied research. In contrast, new notions include the four types of scholarship that Boyer fleshed out in his influential report: the scholarships of discovery, integration,

application, and teaching. Indeed, an impetus behind Boyer's work was the desire to "break out of the tired old teaching versus research debate and define, in more creative ways, what it means to be a scholar" (p. xii). Boyer believed that it was "time to recognize the full range of faculty talent and the great diversity of functions higher education must perform" (p. xii). In that remark, albeit tacitly, Boyer acknowledged community colleges.

Vaughan (1991, p. 5) defined scholarship "in a way that conforms to and enhances fulfillment of the community college mission." To Vaughan, scholarship is systematic, rational, and involves critical analysis. It involves precise observation, organization, and "the recording of information in the search for truth and order" (p. 5). It results in a product that is shared with others both within and outside the field. The traditional notion of research, to Vaughan, is "but one form of scholarship" (p. 5). Vaughn, in agreement with Parilla (1987) and Pellino, Blackburn, and Boberg (1984), specified what kinds of activities should be considered as scholarship, some of which include art exhibits, original essays and poems, bibliographies, new instructional materials, lectures that summarize current thinking on a topic, work leading to published op-ed pieces, and technical innovations leading to patents. As Palmer (1991) pointed out, all of these activities follow the broad interpretation of scholarship advocated by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Boyer, 1990).

Of Boyer's (1990) four types of scholarship, the scholarships of application and teaching seem as if they would fit most naturally and usefully with the student-centered mission of most community colleges. Application of knowledge is an appropriate emphasis, given that approximately 60% of community college students are enrolled in vocational and technical programs (Brint, 2003). And teaching, as the "heartbeat of the educational enterprise" (American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1988, p. 7), seems as if it would be the perfect focus for scholarship by community college faculty. Cohen (2005), in fact, advocated investigations that focus on the relationship between educational processes and outcomes. Moreover, "scholarship, rightly understood, is an indispensable adjunct to excellent teaching" (Parilla, 1987, p. 111).

Although Boyer (1990, p. 61) mentioned classroom research (see Cross and Steadman, 1996) as a "form of scholarship [that] is potentially appropriate for community colleges," Palmer (1991) was skeptical because "the instructor does not write up his or her results or otherwise formally share them with colleagues" (p. 71). To Kroll (1990), faculty members should make the results of their research public—and their work must contribute to the knowledge base of the field—in order for their work to afford them professional identity as a scholar. Indeed, having the identity of scholar (instead of teacher) is key to professionalism that was missing from the faculty member who admitted feeling like a fraud in an interview with Wolfe and Strange (2003, p. 355).

In contrast with Palmer's (1991) critical view of classroom research as a "private activity" (p. 71), Boyer's (1990) understanding seems more in line with what is today known as the scholarship of teaching and learning, which McKinney (2003, p. 2) defined as the "systematic study of teaching and/or learning and the public sharing and review of such work through presentations or publications." Note that McKinney's definition assumes that the results of classroom research will be disseminated to others, fulfilling one of Kroll's (1990) and Palmer's (1991) requirements for scholarship.

With this new definition of scholarship replacing the university-centric idea of research, the question of mission creep of community colleges is no longer an issue. Community colleges are not changing their missions, nor are they infringing upon territory historically associated with the four-year schools. They should no longer be criticized for encouraging research to the exclusion of other forms of scholarship that are deemed more appropriate to or more feasible within the community college milieu. In addition, Boyer's scholarship of teaching, especially, opens the door to a new understanding of the profession of teaching.

Examples of Classroom Research in the Community College

Although education-related academic journals are not overflowing with examples of classroom research carried out in the community college context, cases of sound and valuable research, undertaken and authored by community college faculty, can occasionally be found. Although not intertextually identified as classroom research, *per se*, two examples are pieces by Cukras (2006) of Bronx Community College (New York) and Hammons-Bryner and Robinson (1994) of Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (Tifton, Georgia), both of which speak to teaching and learning strategies relevant to faculty and students at all postsecondary levels. Thus, their work contributes to the knowledge base of the field of teaching and learning. Smith (2000), at Raritan Valley Community College (Somerville, New Jersey), undertook an ambitious project, observing classes at both a community college and at a university, interviewing faculty, and identifying practical suggestions for (any) faculty to become more effective teachers by developing a "spirit" in the classes they teach. Smith's work exemplifies classroom research that moves beyond the venue of a single faculty member, department, or institution.

And although relevant pieces are typically scattered throughout the literature, journals occasionally publish themed issues addressing scholarship in community colleges. Two issues of *Community/Junior College* (Griffey, Hill, & Wood, 1991a, 1991b) were devoted to "Teaching and Learning in Community and Junior Colleges." Eighteen articles based on presentations at a conference were selected for publication; of these, ten were authored by community college faculty. Eight of these pieces (Brown, 1991; Callanan & Sweatt, 1991; Cook, 1991; Cunningham, 1991; Ewing, 1991; Mizell, 1991; Pugh, 1991; Spear, 1991) reported results of classroom research projects, and most

offered both reflective evaluations and implications for other faculty members. The August 2003 issue of *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* (Levinson, 2003) is another such themed issue that includes articles and essays by community college practitioners; but these articles describe concepts or programs that contextualized, yet were not based on, classroom research. The time seems ripe for another themed journal issue that focuses on productive classroom research projects carried out in community colleges.

Conclusion: The Profession of Teaching

The perceived need for disciplinary connection as a component of faculty professionalization suggests that the scholarship of teaching could create a common scholarly genre to bring community college faculty closer together. Twombly (2004, p. 38) suggested that “all college professors” could be thought of as “belong[ing] to a larger profession of teaching”; and Cohen and Brawer (2003, p. 97) discussed the possibilities of a “professionalized community college faculty organized around the discipline of instruction.” Such an idea is compelling in that it supports the community college mission by focusing on the needs of the students, necessary actors in the scholarship of teaching and the discipline of instruction. At the same time, a discipline of instruction attends to the needs of community college faculty by serving, ideally, to reduce feelings of “professional isolation” that may be especially common at smaller community colleges, where faculty typically assume more generalist roles (Wolfe & Strange, 2003, p. 351). To Prager (2003, p. 591), scholarship “endows [community college] faculty members with the privileges of citizenship beyond the classroom.”

Finally, Boyer (1990) may not have been thinking of his modes of scholarship as methods for professionalization, because university professors (his primary audience) were already viewed as professionals when he published the report. Nor may he have envisioned his four scholarships as vehicles to subvert the criticisms of mission creep on the part of community colleges. Subscribing to a broader conception of scholarship, instead of a narrower view of research, also helps to move community colleges and their faculty members out of the shadow of the four-year schools and research universities. Community college faculty can contribute to scholarly conversations without compromising the quality of their instruction and may even, in the case of the scholarship of teaching and learning, improve their effectiveness in the classroom. Scholarship, conceptualized as presented in this brief, encourages community college faculty “to understand themselves both as practitioners who can utilize research to enhance practice and [as] researchers who can contribute to their profession through significant practice-based research” (Sperling, 2003, p. 593). Ultimately, community college students benefit, community college faculty benefit, and the community colleges themselves benefit through an increased sense of scholarly and academic worth, merit, and contribution.

The author: Steven E. Gump, M.B.A., M.A., is a doctoral student in higher education administration at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He can be reached at sgump@uiuc.edu.

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University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
College of Education
51 Gerty Drive, CRC Room 129 · Champaign, IL 61820
217-244-9390 · Fax: 217-244-0851
Website: <http://occrl.ed.uiuc.edu>